

# The Briefing



*Thank you for printing this page. Do come back to [matthiasmedia.com/briefing](http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing) again, as we are constantly adding new and challenging Christian articles. Please note that, to save you paper and ink, we have stopped navigation, comments and other unnecessary elements from printing.*

## A preacher's near blunder

Gordon Cheng (<http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/authors/gordon-cheng/>) | 3 March, 2011

Well, I preached [Psalm 11](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ps%2011) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ps%2011>). For what it's worth, you can find a somewhat sloppy manuscript somewhat sloppily inserted into the comments of [my previous post](http://solapanel.org/article/psalm_11a_psalm_about_jesus/) ([http://solapanel.org/article/psalm\\_11a\\_psalm\\_about\\_jesus/](http://solapanel.org/article/psalm_11a_psalm_about_jesus/)).

I made the mistake of assuming that the [ESV text](http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=Ps+11) (<http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=Ps+11>), which I used, would be fine. It was, except that the [NIV text](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2011&version=NIV1984;ESV) (<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2011&version=NIV1984;ESV>)—which was the preferred Bible translation at the church I was visiting—departed ever so slightly from the ESV at two significant points.

Firstly, in the second half of the verse in [Psalm 11:2](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ps%2011.2) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ps%2011.2>), the NIV did not have enemies “shooting in the dark” (as in the ESV) but enemies shooting “from the shadows”. This ruined one of my sub-points and an illustration. I had some fine purple prose ready to flow forth about how the enemies, unlike God, were just as much in the dark about what they were shooting *at*, as their righteous target was in the dark about where the enemies were shooting *from*.

Sadly, my Hebrew is virtually non-existent, [\(#f1\)](#)<sup>1</sup> but my handy-dandy Accordance Bible software (which shows me English and original languages side by side on the screen, together with mouse-over translations) assures me in verse

two that the Hebrew *bemo-‘ophel* is literally ‘in darkness’. So I think the ESV is correct here (if not better—I am not really in a position to make that call [\(#f2\)](#)<sup>2</sup>).

Secondly, in the second half of verse 4, the ESV translation has the rather spooky phrase “[the LORD’s] eyelids test the children of man”, which I [blogged about](http://ingmarhingwah.blogspot.com/2011/02/his-eyelids-test-children-of-man.html) (<http://ingmarhingwah.blogspot.com/2011/02/his-eyelids-test-children-of-man.html>). The NIV, however, has translated the same phrase as “his eyes examine them”. Once again, the Accordance software leaps to the rescue and assures me that the Hebrew word *af’appayim* (meaning ‘eyelids’) is most definitely in the original text. So the ESV appears to have the better of the NIV in this instance. Even so, this slight difference in the NIV junked up a fittingly scary illustration about the judge in a lawcourt not being asleep, but able to scrutinize defendants even with his eyes closed.

My point here is not to dismiss the NIV while boosting the ESV, although the ESV tends to do better generally at translating words that are actually there in the original (at least in the Greek New Testament, where I do have some chance to compare easily with the original Greek). Also, anyone who claims that the distinctions between English translations means that the Bible is riddled with translational errors can see that in this example—as elsewhere—the difference in meaning is minuscule, fading to non-existent.

But the fiddly and tiny differences were enough to nearly mess up one sub-point and two illustrations in a brief three-point sermon. Had I not checked and compared the two translations ahead of time (by about five minutes!), both I and the congregation would have managed to thoroughly confuse ourselves, without really understanding where the problem had arisen.

The moral for preachers: work from original languages where possible, and check what Bible translations your congregation members have in their hands.

The moral for congregation members: trust your translation, and if your preacher isn’t making sense, gently inquire if you can have a quick look at his Bible.

[\(#r1\)](#)<sup>1</sup> Fixing a serious Hebrew deficiency is the next major academic project on the to-do list, but as it took 21 years to finish a lowly (though longish) essay in church history, please do not hold your breath, dear reader.

[\(#r2\)](#)<sup>2</sup> See note 1.

Comments are closed.